

# ***Por La Encendida Calle Antillana: African Impact on Puerto Rican Domestic Architecture***

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**W**hen premier Puerto Rican poet Palés Matos wrote the well-known lines of his *Black Majesty* poem:

**Por la encendida calle antillana  
va Tembandumba de la Quimbamba...**

**he was trying to capture the Tembandumba's impact as she walked down the Antillean street. His artistry with words allows us to picture her elusive progress and the lasting impact her beauty and African heritage had on the population. Palés' poem, like this paper, deals with intangibles. One of Puerto Rico's most powerful cultural components is embodied by our African heritage. However, just as Tembandumba lives only by means of a poem, the subject of this paper—African impact on the island's domestic architecture—exists only in the interpretation of some rapidly disappearing ruins and a few old photographs.(1)**

This work is about things that are no more. It deals with absence and tries to dislodge two of Westerners most cherished attitudes. First, the idea that—to use Pevsner's grand metaphor—only cathedrals and not bicycle sheds deserve academic scrutiny and, second, that cultural significance is exclusively embodied in physically identifiable architectural artifacts. Many, many years ago, when I first tried to understand why historic preservation (or architectural history for that matter) seldom dealt with aspects present in herstory (as opposed to history), I realized that Western thought is, at best, seriously biased. Take as an example

Caribbean domestic architecture, its historical and cultural development. Seldom, if ever, is the topic academically explored; seldom, if ever, is it analyzed as a significant part of our cultural heritage.

While a few Caribbean dwellings, almost always examples of the big house type, are presented as transplanted examples of grand European architecture, the topic is rarely analyzed in holistic fashion. As a result, society fails to understand how, for example, the slave hut bred as many, if not more, important and relevant domestic types as the big house. More significantly, we fail to consider the role women, Puerto Ricans of African descent, and other subordinate groups played in the creation of our architectural heritage. African influence in Puerto Rican architecture is non-subject in part because the following questions have not been addressed. How can a subordinate group contribute to a culture's architectural development? Even if possible, are huts and similar humble structures culturally significant? Most importantly and assuming there was an influence, where are the artifacts that prove it? For many decades, only silence answered these questions. Unfortunately, the void in knowledge was construed as non-participation by the African group. This work tries to shed light upon these topics.

## **The Caribbean Hut**

When Columbus first came into contact with native Puerto Rican or Taino architecture he wrote: "There [he is referring to Puerto Rico] I saw very good houses that would compare favorably with those in Valencia." It soon became obvious that he was fudging the truth: the Caribbean Natives did not construct following European ideas. In a fascinating and ironic historic twist, the native's paradigmatic building—the *bohío*—was similar to the Vitruvian hut: a makeshift affair, open to nature although usually round. As expected, the *bohío* had much in

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common with many African types, enshrined in the memories of those that suffered the slave Diaspora.

When the tragic trade first started, slaves in the island were not provided with or allowed to have their own individual homes. Usually, they lived in *barracas* or *barracones* where they experienced a total and degrading lack of privacy. However, as time went on, some were allowed to have their own huts. In spite of their humble ethos, this building—a condensation of native and African ideas—is iconic of a momentous cultural transformation. The hut provided something the *barracones* did not: your very own dwelling artifact, a place where you could plant your very own roots. It is known that Caribbean islanders followed (they still do) specific rites as they built these houses, known as huts, *ranchitos* or *bohíos*. From Guadeloupe's ceremony of marking the cutting down of the master post of the hut (2) and the old Puerto Rican phrase: plantar *holcones*, (3) to the Cuban religious ceremony that took place at the construction site, they all showcase the importance associated to this rite of passage (having your own dwelling). There is dignity associated to being able to construct your very own hut for, even the simplest of them, represented the transcription of many hopes and dreams. It is fascinating that so much immutable feeling could go into such an architecturally mutable form.

The African descendants transformed that native typology and made possible a new organization, both spatial and urban. Instead of the round floor plan common to the natives, the square or rectangle was preferred, as in many African locales. The makeshift, nomadic native ethos was also transformed: the *bohío* acquired more substance both in terms of its materials and structural components. Probably, the most

interesting transformation was that it became a closed and enclosed space. In most cases it sported no windows and only a small door to the interior.

This lack of windows needs to be explored, for one would think that opening interiors unto the outdoors is a must in a tropical milieu. However, for the enslaved population (and you were enslaved whether you were a slave or freed slave) the bright outdoor space was not their space, but rather a cruel stage, a vivid reminder of the unfortunate situation they experienced. A dark, closed interior created a sense of intimacy that protected—to paraphrase Bachelard—the user's immense intimacy from prying eyes. It is recorded that all over the Caribbean, in the few cases where windows do appear, blind shutters closed them, as per African tradition and in marked contrast to the fancy European shutters. When inside, you wanted to shut out the exterior, not to bring it in. This characteristic became an intrinsic part of the Puerto Rican house. To this day, most windows, when shut, allow for no light to come in.

In most cases, the interior space served as living-cum-sleeping place (called a *pieza* or *aposento*) that sported a dirt floor. The dirt floor had a unique symbolism and, in keeping with its significance, had its own special name: the *soberao*, a word of unknown origin. Some years ago, when visiting one of these abodes, the lady of the house kept excusing herself regarding her untidy *soberao*. (4) As I knew, she insisted, her husband was a carpenter and there was no way she could keep it clean all the time. At first, I was nonplussed with her extreme preoccupation. I now understand that the *soberao* proves you have a place of your own (even if you an *arrimao* and the land belongs to another person), that you possess your very own dwelling locus.

For the old lady, her *soberao* was evidence not only that she had a house but also that she was the lady of that house. I have read that in the United States, slaves at times insisted on this type of floor finish as an act of appropriation. (5) The feel and texture of the dirt against bare feet, the smell of packed earth, and the darkness enveloping these sensations was probably a reminder of their long-gone African past.

In the island, cooking was considered a communal affair and, once again, the African influence transformed the native experience: the Taino *batey* became a common area shared by the *bohíos* that help organize it. Contrary to European plaza standards for such areas, this iconic space did not follow any particular geometric layout. It was an informal place to work, chat, cook, play, and, on occasions, dance. It is interesting to note that balconies, the paradigmatic European architectural domestic artifact, are not present in the African-Puerto Rican hut. In the island, Europeans used balconies as visual instruments of order. While in the countryside, they acted as tribunes from where the activities of the farm could be inspected in the city, they maintained the feminine *purdah* system, being the only outside place a woman could venture on her own. In both cases, they represented something foreign, seldom experienced by the group under study: a place to spend time at ease. The communal *batey* was the equivalent of the European balcony: it was both signifier and a signified.

The lack of interest in formal arrangement evidenced in the *batey* is parallel to the way the group related to the city. Even in the tightly restricted San Juan urban area, the free African-Puerto Rican population chose to express themselves in a different manner. It is interesting to note that the *barrio* where

most lived was distinguished by its own, if unfortunate, name. If we analyze an 1880 copy of a 1771 plan of the area, we detect that the individual houses in the *barrio* do not follow the rigid urban grid layout that defines the rest of the urban enclave. As the orthogonal scheme reaches the area and as can be seen even today, the houses deconstruct the grid. In fact, some houses in the area still sport a small garden in the front, something unheard of in the rest of the city.

A *bohío* was more than just a shelter; it was a womb-like milieu that provided comfort by means of privacy. The type experimented with minimalist architectural ideas and its unique personality was the result of importing the African architectural experience into the domain of the native house. At a later stage, other African elements were introduced, such as the emphasis on the long axis and special decorations on the main façade. When these traditions fused with other ideas (such as the Anglo-American grille), the unique Puerto Rican house came to be. Most examples of the hut type are long gone but their architectural influence is still with us in every solidly closed window and in every housing subdivision street used as a *batey* by children and grownups alike.

### **On Things Unseen**

Not all things are visible; there are things unseen regarding African impact to architectural culture. Because they are absent, we lack traditional physical evidence. Contemporary Deconstructivist ideas point out that society is guided by phonocentrism. This attitude is extremely partial to physical things. As a result, we believe that physicality represents truth and reality. As we grapple with this idea we construct binaries, such as: male/female, Black/White,

being/not being, presence/absence, among others. As Derrida has masterfully explained, these binary oppositions favor the “groundly” term, the one that supposedly articulates the fundamentals. Hence, woman is everything a man is not.

Unfortunately, phonocentrism also affects historic preservation stances. For example, we usually ascribe cultural significance to things we can see or, at the most intangible, to places directly related to events we define as significant; in other words, sites that physically represent the historic happenings. If we do some soul searching, we realize that we are really in the business of preserving tangibles. Yet tangibles are a trap that causes us to believe that only “real things” matter. This is particularly the case regarding architecture. We all fall into this trap. I for one, on many occasions, define architecture to my students using Heidegger’s dwelling concept that, naturally, requires presence. However, is cultural significance exclusively tied to the presence of an object or a sign?

Unfortunately, most of the time, our answer to this question is yes. That is the reason why the Underground Railroad does not qualify as a cultural resource: we do not have a string of “things” we can see that relate to it. Curiously, because of our architectural phonocentrism, even when we can see, we might not understand. Ruins such as these have a paradigmatic presence in most Puerto Rican *haciendas*. While their name: *barracas*, *barracones* or *beneficiados* should alert us, most specialists miss the point regarding the cultural significance of these structures. These places are more than just ruins of storage areas. They are also domestic artifacts, for slaves lived here. The absence of traditional domestic architectural personality clouds our understanding. More importantly, understood as

mere storage areas and not as slaves’ dwellings, there seems to be no urgent need to preserve the half dozen that still remain.

We interpret presence as substance and existence. To further complicate the issue, presence sets the following claims: first, that truth lies behind all appearances; second, that architectural artifacts represent the spirit of an age; and third, that individual artistic emotion is palpably present in each constructed building. Interpreted in this fashion, these architectural artifacts are understood as symbols of commercial ventures, as examples of specific construction techniques...as everything excepted as the homes of slaves.

Architecture is a physical artifact, like speech, yet it is also a symbol of a mental experience. Architectural “reality” is constructed of more than just stones and bricks. There exist supplemental components, like the *genus loci*, to mention just one. As preservationists working with the past for the future, we have a cultural exigency: we must question traditional thinking, dislodge its certitudes, and disrupt its quest for an undivided point of view. How can we do this? Let’s accept Derrida’s recommendation and privilege feelings over physicality, not being over being, absence over presence. If not we might be in danger of forgetting the importance some artifacts have in themselves and, most importantly, one of our culture’s most fascinating and elusive histories: the relationship between the object we call a house and Puerto Ricans of African descent.

### **Conclusion**

Buildings are a necessity of the metaphysics of presence. Hence their historical significance for they carry full presence. However, our human cultural heritage is formed not only of thoughts

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expressed physically but also of emotions. Regarding African influence and Puerto Rican architecture I believe in privileging absence over presence. Some structures are more than just *barracones* sitting in planted fields.

Whenever I see places like this, I think of battlefields. We preserve battlefields because for several hours something considered important happened there. These ruins are landmarks just like battlefields. In these places, in every cotton, coffee or sugar row, a battle was fought every hour of every day, every week, every year, for several centuries. The battle was for something sacred: individual dignity and freedom. They are truly battlefields of honor where both blood and sweat were spent. Because of this, they are a paradigmatic place of society's cultural memory.

*Por la encendida calle antillana  
va Tembandumba de la Quimbamba  
Flor de Tortóla, rosa de Uganda,  
por ti crepitan bombas y bámbulas;  
por ti en calendas desenfrenadas  
quema la Antilla su sangre ñáñiga.  
Haítí te ofrece sus calabazas;  
fogoses rones te da Jamaica;  
Cuba te dice: dale mulata!  
y Puerto Rico: melao, melamba!*

**Majestad Negra**  
-Luis Palés Matos

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Professors LaVerne Wells-Bowie and Andrew Chin, as well as Ms. Toni Lee and Mr. Brian Joyner for their help and interest in this paper.

2. The post is called *Pied-bois d'ail*. Jack Berthelot and Martine Gaumé, *Kaz Antiyé Jan Moun Rété* (Paris: Editions Caribéennes, 1982), 85.

3. The phrase literally translates into "planting" the wooden structural posts.

4. My friend Arch Gloria M. Ortiz, State Architect for the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office, once told me of a similar experience when visiting the house of an artisan or *santero*.

5. John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 165.

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